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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role played by parents in their children's career decision-making process. Parents are identified as preeminent influences of adolescents' career decision making, a fact that has been largely unrecognized by career guidance personnel and school administrators, as evidenced by the lack of programs designed to enable parents to promote their children's career decision making. The report identifies four programs that may be used by school personnel to modify this situation: (1) career nights, (2) using parents as consultants in their child's career decision making, (3) parental use of a self-directed career center, originally designed for students, and (4) a handbook for career planners that could be given to parents. The report also makes recommendations for ways that career guidance personnel and administrators can involve parents in their children's career exploration. (Author/KC)

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PARENTS AND PEERS: THEIR IMPORTANCE IN THE CAREER DECISION MAKING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role played by parents in their children's career decision making process. Parents are identified as preeminent influences of adolescents' career decision making, a fact that has been largely unrecognized by career guidance personnel and school administrators as evidenced by the lack of programs designed to enable parents to promote their children's career decision making. Programmatic alternatives that may be used by counselors to modify this situation are identified, as are guidelines for what parents can do to maximize the potential of their influence. Recommendations for career guidance personnel and administrators are also provided.

Career decision making is one of the certainties of life. Everybody makes career decisions. While the actual decisions may vary from person-to-person, the decisions that are made shape not only that individual's career, but that person's identity as well. The importance of choosing a career has been well documented. One of the most well known authorities, Erik Erikson (1953), contends that selecting a career is the primary task that confronts adolescents and young adults. Making career choices, according to Erikson, leads to the formation of one's identity. Those who do not respond to the challenge of selecting a career foreclose on their opportunity to achieve an identity that is uniquely their own (Marcia, 1980).

Both the certainty and importance of career decision making for adolescents makes it imperative to consider how best to prepare people in this age group to make those decisions. Numerous solutions to this dilemma have been proposed by a variety of theorists. Two elements seem common to most of the proposed solutions. First, they are meant to be conducted within the context of an educational setting, usually by school counselors or vocational educators. Second, as reported by Rehberg and Hotchkiss (1979), such efforts are largely ineffectual. Additional evidence of the ineffectiveness of these efforts can be inferred from the High School and Beyond Study (1980), which reported high school seniors' beliefs about who influenced their career plans. Guidance personnel ranked below parents, peers, and teachers and above college and military recruiters. Other research (Brookover, Erikson, & Joiner, 1967; Coleman, 1961; Hamachak, 1971) substantiates the contention that both parents, and peers have a significant influence over the decision making process of adolescents which, in turn, effects their career decision making.

If educators are serious about their intentions of influencing adolescents career decision making behavior, the evidence cited above suggests that their efforts might best be channeled through those parties deemed influential by adolescents themselves, namely, parents and peers. For whatever reason, however, efforts of that kind are rare. Because of the paucity of such programs, it is critically important that methods which parents and/or peers can use to assist adolescents' career decision making be identified.

The purposes of this report are four: First, to provide a brief review of the character of parental and/or peer influence on adolescents' career decision making; second, to identify four types of efforts that may be used by parents to influence adolescents' career decision making; third, to identify guidelines which may be utilized by parents to enhance adolescents' career decision making; and finally, to list recommendations for guidance personnel who wish to work with parents on this critical issue. These four purposes may better be stated as questions: 1. Why are parents and peers influential? 2. How can parents be more effective in assisting the career decision making process?, 3. What types of programs are currently available?, 4. How can guidance personnel be more effective?

1. Why are Parents and Peers Influential?

Parental influence on their offspring's career decision making has been widely recognized. Beginning more than a half-century ago, sociologists began to theorize about occupational choice (e.g., career decision making) based upon status dimensions (e.g., power, prestige, income) of occupations (Rehberg & Hotchkiss, 1979). This theoretical orientation was translated into analysis of parent-to-child (typically father-to-son) occupational mobility tables. As

indicated by Rehberg & Hotchkiss (1979), this research did not emphsize study of occupational choice. It did, however, help to identify the importance of social factors such as parental status in the formation of occupational choice.

Since that beginning, the study of parental influence expanded to include variables such as parents' education, socio-economic status, and educational and occupational expectations. Blau & Duncan (1967), for example, found that subjects' occupational status was influenced by both the educational level and the occupation of the fathers. They also found that subjects' education level was influenced by the education level and occupation of their fathers. A weakness of this line of research, was that it was limited to males. The results do suggest, however, that the combination of both father's occupation and education contributed substantially to the social milieu that influences a son's occupational choice.

In an attempt to further explain the relationship between parental status and occupational attainment, Sewell and his associates (Sewell, Haller, & Poctes, 1969; Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf, 1970) expanded the Blau & Duncan model to include social psychological variables. The variables they added included: 1) student occupational-status expectation in high school, 2) student educational expectation in high school, 3) significant others, and 4) educational attainment. Sewell and his associates assumed that occupational attainment would be influenced by student occupational-status expectation and educational achievement, both of which are influenced by student educational expectation. Both student educational and occupational expectation were thought to be influenced by the student's significant other group, which, in turn, is influenced by parental status. Stated differently, Sewell and his

associates hypothesized that "parental status influences the significant others with whom youth associates; significant others influence youths' educational and occupational expectations, and career expectations affect achievements" (Rehberg & Hotchkiss, 1979, p. 123).

Independent investigations of the model proposed by Sewell and his associates have supported their assumptions concerning the influence of significant others on career expectations and occupational attainment.

It may be assumed, therefore, that the significant others in an adolescent's life, including his/her peer group, play an important role in the transmission of parental status, and thereby, influence the youth's career decisions. It is important to note, however, that this assumption necessitates a special definition of peer group. In this instance, an adolescent's peer group refers to that part of the family's social milieu in which the adolescent's understanding of the family's values and beliefs about issues related to education and occupation can be examined, evaluated, and acted upon (either through affirmation or negation of the family's values) by the adolescent. It is important to recognize, in this instance, that one's peer group is a function of one's family. The peer group does not exist independently of the family. Because the social milieu of the family establishes the limits of peer group influence, we will limit our remarks in the remainder of this presentation to the role that the parents play in their children's decision making.

2. How Can Parents be More Effective?

Recognition of the fact that parents play an extremely vital role in youth's career decision making is an important first step toward helping parents utilize their influence. It is equally important to recognize,

however, that adolescence and young adulthood are crucial times in youths' lives. It is a time when youths are involved in the twin processes of differentiating themselves from their families and forming their own identities. Differentiation refers to the process of gaining one's personal autonomy and an identity independent of their parents (Marcia, 1980) while retaining membership in their families. At the heart of the differentiation process is the examination, evaluation, and modification of family values, beliefs, and behaviors on the part of the adolescent. As suggested previously, peer group interaction plays a critical role in the overall process.

The process of differentiation is both difficult and complex. It is difficult in that youth become less dependent on their family to satisfy their emotional, physical and economic needs. This lessening of dependence typically results in the modification of established family communication patterns and the requisite acquisition of new behavior on the part of both the parents and the youth. As may be expected, along with the acquisition of new behavior arises for both the parent and the youth a period of awkwardness. The process is complex because at the same time that youths are trying to differentiate from their parents, they remain dependent upon their parents for support in certain critical areas. Career planning is one of those areas.

According to James Marcia (1980), parents and youth respond differently to the differentiation process. As stated previously in this paper, the outcome of the differentiation process for youth is the formation of an identity. Marcia (1980) has identified four distinct identity statuses: identity achievement, forclosures, identity diffusion, and moratorium. These four statuses are thought to differ along two criterion: the presence or

absence of a decision-making period and the extent of personal investment in two areas: As defined by Marcia (1980),

> Identity Achievements are individuals who have experienced a decision-making period and are pursuing self-chosen occupation and ideological goals. Foreclosures are persons who are also committed to occupational and ideological positions, but these have been parentally chosen rather than self-chosen. They show little or no evidence of "crisis." Identity Diffusions are young people who have no set occupational or ideological direction, regardless of whether or not they may have experienced a decision-making period. Moratoriums are individuals who are currently struggling with occupational and/or ideological issues; they are in identity crisis.

According to Marcia, parental involvement in the differentiation process contributes to the outcome of adolescents' identity formation. In the case of Identity Achievements, adolescents have a balanced view of their parents and their parent's life style. Parent-child communication is characterized by positive though moderately ambivalent relationships. Foreclosures, on the other hand, experience both pressure and support for conformity to the family values. With this identity type parents (especially fathers) tend to dominate their children and emotional expression is discouraged. In contrast to both Identity Achievements and Foreclosures, Identity Diffusions have negative parent-child interaction patterns. This pattern is characterized by the Identity Diffusion's feeling of rejection and detachment from parents. Finally, Moratoriums are described as having ambivalent relationships with parents. But more importantly, Moratoriums see parents as dissapointed in them.

In short, the differentiation process appears to magnify the importance of the characteristics of the relationship between parent and adolescents. Those characteristics, in turn, influence subsequent adolescents' responses to career decision making tasks and the formation of their respective identities. Ideally, it is not enough that parents simply be availble to their children during this process but that they also be prepared to utilize their status power to promote the development of their children.

Acknowledging the importance of parental participation in youths' career decision making, and recognizing that its importance is rooted in parent's executive status (e.g., leadership role) within the family, a fundamental question is raised: How may parents utilize their status power to promote the continual development of their children? Research evidence cited above (e.g., Marcia, 1980) suggests that when left to their own resources, some parents are successful in their efforts to promote growth while others are not. That is not to say, however, that some parents are not interested in helping their children develop. Rather, the research findings suggest that some parents are ill prepared to help their children address the issues associated with career decision making. As stated by Thomas Gordon (1970), parenting is the most difficult job in the world, and is one for which very few people are adequately trained.

What steps, then, can parents take to enhance their contribution to their child's development, especially in the area of career decision making? The answer is two-fold. The first part emphasizes guidelines for parents to utilize themselves, and the second part emphasizes what career guidance personnel can do to assist parents. While it is important to recognize that these two parts are not mutually exclusive, for purposes of this presentation

we will treat them as such. Therefore, guidelines for parents will be delineated first, and then guidelines for career guidance personnel, second.

Lee Knefelkamp (1982), an authority in adolescent and adult development, has stated that the most important form of power is the power to empower others. Such a statement is very applicable to the role that parents can play in their offspring's career decision making. Parents may wish to act in ways that will empower their children, but as stated previously, the parents task is a difficult one. They need to be available to their offspring, but they must also be willing to distance themselves from the decisions their children must make. Being both available and distanced at the same time is difficult in the easiest circumstances. To ask parents and children to manage this feat during adolescence is to make a difficult request indeed.

As stated before in this paper, little has been done to help parents complete this difficult task. Those efforts that have been attempted have consisted of lists of suggestions for parents. Two examples of those lists can be found in the Appendices I and II of this paper. Examination of those lists reveals two types of advice for parents. One type focuses on action that parents may wish to take. Examples include listen, accept, participate, encourage, communicate, support and share. The other type of advice suggests ways for parents to be. Examples include be aware, be careful, be active and be supportive. Taken togetner these two types of advice provide a foundation for parental action.

Development flourishes in an environment which is characterized by appropriate levels of challenges and supports (Sanford, 1966). Parents can help create such an environment if they will listen to their adolescents, if they will respond to them in a sincere and caring manner, and if they will challenge them to continue to grow.

3. What Kinds of Programs are Available?

Despite the vital role that parents play in youth's career decision making, very few programs have been developed to assist them in that task. Career nights seem to be the most popular form of assistance provided to parents. An example of such a program is described below.

Program 1: Project Big.

Project Bit is a district-wide career night held alternately at one of the Maine Township High Schools in the spring of the year. Project Big began in 1970 and has grown considerably over the past years. In 1975, approximately 3,500 students and parents talked with representatives of nearly 200 different career areas at Project Big. Exact attendance figures are difficult to determine--in the past the number of programs distributed were used to approximate attendance.

In order to encourage and stimulate community and industrial support within the district, the Career Education Advisory Council was developed. The Council was originally organized as a small group of local business people and cooperative education coordinators who would occasionally meet to discuss their common interest in students who work part-time while going to school part-time. The Council has expanded and now holds regularly scheduled meetings at the district administration building. Career counselors play an important role in the function of the organization. When coordinating a program like Project Big, it is important to establish a close working relationship with the committee which is responsible for determining which careers should be represented. For the first program of this type the career interest survey sponsored by the Explorer Scout Program could be used to determine career interest areas of the students. With the information

obtained by surveying all junior class memebers, the Explorer Scouts classify the interests of individuals into fifteen job clusters of the U.S. Department of Labor. The Explorers then provide each school with a computer printout of collective and individual career interests. This information provides a valuable tool for the counselor in developing a career program.

Contacting and confirming the list of participants and representatives of various careers is probably the most important and time consuming task of all. Identification cards must be prepared for participating companies as well as identification tags for each representative. A program booklet is provided for visitors as they arrive. This program includes the names of the representatives and the names of the companies for which the representatives work.

Project Big is widely publicized in each of the four high schools as well as the entire community. Publicity includes articles in the school newspapaers, local and Chicago area newspapers, radio and TV spot announcements, and personal appearances by Career Counselors at luncheon meetings of various organizations. Posters are placed in windows of businesses and on the bulletin boards of classrooms; and letters are sent to all parents from the Superintendent of Schools.

Financing Project Big is accomplished by funds received from various service organizations, businesses and irdustries in the community. In addition to requests for financial assistance, these agencies are asked to volunteer their time and talent in representing careers.

While such events as Project Big are popular, the actual value of programs such as this for parents has never been empirically documented. It is questionable whether a single event can be of significant value to a

process that occurs typically over a number of years. While students must make decisions about what to do after graduation from high school, parents need to become involved in that decision making process long before youth are required to make that decision based upon socially imposed deadlines (i.e., the completion of twelve years of schooling). The three program descriptions that follow are identified because they focus on the ongoing nature of the career planning process.

Program 2: Parents as Consultants in Their Child's Career Decision Making.

This program was designed by a group of career counselors at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (Daniels, Roberts, May, Stockwell, & Costello, 1980). The purposes of the program are to:

a. provide parents with up-to-date information about the process of selecting an occupation,
b. teach parents basic consulting skills that they can utilize with their children,
c. receive feedback and support for their attempts to utilize the consultation model.

The program is designed to be conducted as a workshop consisting of a minimum of two ninety minute sessions. Additional sessions may be added at the discretion of the workshop members. Each workshop is conducted as a small-group discussion with time set aside for both didactic and experiential activities. A series of learning modules developed for use in the program are based on the Harden's Career Decision making model. Each module contains specific objectives, activities, and discussion questions that may be used by the workshop leader to guide and fascilitate the group process. Because each module addresses a particular issue, the modules may be arranged in the manner that is most likely to meet the needs of any particular group.

Program 3: Self-Directed Career Center (SDCC).

The Self-Directed Career Center was developed by Andrew Michlelich and David Belsham at Joliet Junior College in collaboration with the Will-Grundy CETA Consortium. The SDCC is a configuration of posters which outline the career development process in a flow chart scheme. Five stages in the career development process are identified: self-awareness, career exploration, decision making, education and training and job search. There is one poster for each state. Each of the posters represents a series of questions that a client may ask. Each question, in turn, is keyed to an information handout that identifies useful activities. The activities are designed to aid the client in responding to the questions related to their career development.

Although the project was not designed to be used with parents, both the organization and its content suggest its potential utility with that target group. Its utility arises from three factors. First, the program presents career decision making as a process, thus it will have utility across a period of time. Second, the program is keyed to questions that have to be answered, which leaves the responsibility for actual decisions with the student. Third, and perhaps the most important, the program is self-directed. It is a program that can fit the needs of many different decision makers.

Each of these factors is important because they reflect the "real world" of adolescent career decision making, especially as seen from the eyes of parents. That is, choosing a career is not a singular event in the life of the adolescent. It is a process that occurs over time. It is a process that involves the differentiation and integration of numerous pieces of information about oneself, the world of work, and so on. This process is advanced by

answering questions that are identified as individually important while the pace of advancement through the process is different for each individual.

It is suggested here that these materials could be modified and given to parents for their information and use. The actual modifications would be minor and may involve only changes in the wording of some of the questions. The information could be provided to parents in one of two ways: by conducting workshops that would teach parents how to use the materials, or by putting together a brochure that contains the key elements of the program and distributing the brochure to parents. With either technique parents would have a valuable resource at their disposal.

Program 4: Individual School and Career Program (ISCP).

The ISCP was developed by the couseling staff at Rich South High School to provide each student with a personal educational and vocational plan. Compiled in a handbook entitled Horizon, the ISCP is utilized by counselors and students to enhance students' career decision making process and improve their course selections during high school. Information contained in the booklet includes:

1. Individual Written Four-Year Plan
2. Course Offerings
3. Description of Special Needs Programs
4. Personal Interest Inventory
5. Vocational Interest Inventory
6. Information Concerning Optional Testing Program
7. Career Awareness Information Activities
8. Career Planning Information Activity

The table of contents indicates that the handbook is divided into four sections: Direction, Exploration, Preparation-High School, and Preparation-Post High School. Each of the sections contains three or more topical headings. The Direction section, for example, includes such topics as

curriculum, registration, testing, grading system, and graduation. Values, interests, abilities, and skills fall into the Exploration section. Topics like cooperative vocational educational programs, vocational sequential courses, academic sequential courses and the Sauk Area Career Center are found in the Preparation-High School section. Preparation-Post High School addresses such topics as, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, the military, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities.

In all, Horizon, represents a relatively thorough source of information for career planners. While it was not designed to be given to parents for their use when helping their children with their career decisions, most parents would probably find it to be a valuable resource. It only has to be made available for parental use.

The four programs identified above represent four different methods for helping parents to influence their offspring's decision making process. While each program has its unique advantage, it may be impractical to rely on any single program alone. If we are to capitalize on the influential power of parents/peers, we must be prepared not only to utilize and integrate existing techniques but also to create new ones.

4. How Can Career Guidance Personnel be More Effective?

A recent review of career counseling in high schools (Rehberg & Hotchkiss, 1979) identified four factors that limit guidance counselors capacity to influence high school students career decisions. Those factors were:

1. An inability to identify how the school is linked to the world of work.
2. An inability to identify and desribe the nature of the school-to-work transition.
3. The lack of accurate knowledge of local labor market statistics.
4. The inability to provide both the quality and quantity of time all students require when making career decisions.

Two conclusions may be inferred from these findings. First, that career counselors are currently unprepared and unable to address any of these four factors. Second, that if students are to receive the full measure of assistance necessary to make career choices, each of these factors must be addressed. These facts, in turn, raise an important question: What can counselors do to effect a turn about of these four issues?

Our answer to that question is clear. It is our position that career counselors will be more influential in their attempts to assist adolescents address career decisions if they will collaborate with the parents of adolescents in addition to working with adolescents alone. Simply stated, we contend that parents are in a better position to address the unmet needs of adolescents than are guidance counselors, and that parents efforts may effectively be facilitated by their active involvement with career guidance personnel.

The rationale for our position is based on three facts. First, as previously discussed in this paper, parents already play an influential role in their childrens' career decision making. Second, to either a greater or lesser degreee, parents have completed two of the four tasks listed by Rehberg and Hutchkiss. That is, they have linked school to the world of work, and they have experienced the school-to-work transition. Third, parents more than any other person in the student's social milieu, are in the position to provide student's with the quality and quantity of time they need in order to make career decisions. By working with parents and capitilizing on the power and influence they have, career guidance counselors will be better able to assist adolescents make career decisions.

It should be noted, however, that the adoption of such a plan will necessitate change on the part of the career guidance counselor as well as the school administrators. Career guidance personnel will need to make at least two major changes. First, they will have to find ways to meet with the parents and insure involvement in such a program. This step will require that counselors establish communication channels with parents and convince them of their importance in the career decision making process. Second, counselors will have to function as adult educators, working with programs that will attract and involve parents. At a minimum, these programs will have to be a collaborative effort that will maximize the expertise and influence of both the parents and the counselors.

Administrators will need to make parallel changes. They will need to encourage counselors' involvement with parents and recognize that such involvement will have long-term benefits for the school, the parents and the students. It will also be important that administrators allow guidance personnel the time flexibility to operate such a program. Without these two minimal steps of support from the administrators, such a program will encounter difficulty getting off the ground.

Summary

This report has focused on the role of parents in the career decision making of their offspring. Several salient issues were identified in this report. First, parents do play an influential role in their offspring's career decision making. Moreover, the influence is both direct and indirect. It is direct in that parents shape the social milieu in which children grow up. Parental influence is indirect in that the social milieu contains significant others which influence the individual's educational and occupational

expectations, which, in turn, influence their career choice. Second, adolescents differentiation from their family of origin and the attainment of their own identity is influenced by the relationship between adolescents and their parents. Parents are in the preeminent position to influence their children's career decision making. For a variety of reasons however, parents have not been directly involved in their children's career decision making. Third, the schools contribute to parental non-involvement by not providing programs that promote their participation in that vital process. It was also noted that such programs can be designed and implemented. Finally, guidance counselors could enhance their ability to influence adolescents career decision making if they would design and implement programs that would enable them to collaborate with parents on this important task. Such a change would necessitate changes in both the role description and function of the guidance counselors.

The conclusions of this report are clear. Parents represent a virtually untapped resource that career guidance personnel can utilize to facilitate adolescent's career decision making. If career guidance personnel are to utilize this valuable resource, they must begin to redefine their role within the school and begin to do more work with parents, functioning as adult educators. Finally, if the potential that exists in the marriage of parents and counselors is to be realized, educational administrators must encourage, endorse, and reward such practices. Without administrative cooperation, such efforts would be futile. The ingredients for success are available. We suggest it is time to begin.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

1. Listen to your child's expression of dreams about who he/she wants to become.

2. Accept your child as a growing person, regardless of his/her strengths and weaknesses.

3. Take the time to participate in fantasy games in which child acts out jobs.

4. Relate to jobs and things a child likes to do, even if you have no experience in those fields.

5. Supply your child with books, magazines, and games from which interests, capacities, values and job skills can be experienced and learned about.

6. Serve as a career model and introduce your child to other vocations outside your field of work.

7. Permit your child to try out work experiences, even though you may not like the work yourself.

8. Find and use job information resources in helping your child learn more about specific occupations.

9. Support the school's efforts in career education.

10. Permit your children to explore interests in nontraditional occupations regardless of sex or social or economic background.

APPENDIX II

1. Encourage your child to explore areas of self interest to him/her.

2. Endeavor to keep channels of communication open and in use.

3. Help your child to recognize both his assets and limitations in a way which leads to healthy self-acceptance and self-affirmation.

4. Operate from a realistic appraisal of who your child is as opposed to operations from a base of wishes, dreams, and even fantasies.

5. Enable your child to gain firsthand knowledge of occupational possibilities.

6. Help to examine the pro's, con's and other factors relevant to particular occupations.

7. Encourage the use of criteria other than status and salary basis for occupational selection.

8. Plan personal visits to colleges or training facilities.

9. Be aware of not substituting your own aspirations for your child's aspirations.

10. Be careful not to push your child past his/her real capacities.

11. Be as quick to praise where praise is warrented as you are quick to criticize negatively.

12. Allow your child to make an increasing number of independent decisions.

13. Help your son or daughter to realize that none of us is really free to succeed until we are free to make mistakes, and that mistakes need not be dead-ends, but detours.

14. Get information about the school's guidance program and services.

15. Encourage your child to be in touch with the school's guidance program and services.

16. Be aware that occupational and psychological test results are only part of the story about who your child is, and that one person cannot be totally reflected in a test score.

17. Be aware that grades (marks) in school also may not be a comprehensively accurate reflection of your child's capacities.

18. Recognize tnat not everyone ought to go to college.

19. Try to avoid insistence on your child's becoming a "professional person" as opposed to other occupations.

20. Live the life of joyous affirmation through daily involvement and thereby providing your child with an honest expression of what it means to say "yes!" to life.